



NOW RETIRED FROM
COLLEGE LIFE, RON MOPPETT
BEGINS A NEW CHAPTER

RON MOPPETT

BY WES LAFORTUNE

Ron Moppett is experiencing a period of creative renewal. Not that he was ever really stagnant, but as the longtime director/curator (now retired) of the Illingworth Kerr Gallery at Alberta College of Art & Design, he had been spending more time filling out paperwork instead of doing what he's been preparing for his entire adult life: creating paintings that evoke the mysteries of the universe.

The day I meet the Calgary-based artist at his studio in the garage behind his home, he seems relaxed and confident about the direction his life and art are going.

"That's my work, that's what I do," says Moppett, entering his small but



Opposite: Ron Moppett in his garage studio: "it's about how you can lose yourself."

Left: *Blue Window*, 2005, oil, acrylic, paper, pins on wood panel, two panels, 24" x 16" overall

PHOTO BY GEORGE WEBBER

“ I READ THEORY, I READ THE PROFESSIONAL MAGAZINES AND BOOKS, AND I LOOK AT ART. ”

comfortable studio. “I’m not thinking of running off to an island.”

While Moppett’s assertion that he plans to remain in Calgary for the immediate future is certainly true, it seems his mind is often focused on some otherworldly place. Many of his most recent paintings are multipanel works that feature recurring images: the moon, a top hat and a roofline used to form patterns that express the soul of a man who could best be described as a poet. A poet who, rather than penning sonnets, uses paint to uncover his creative self.

“Sometimes it’s hard to know why I like them,” says Moppett about the symbols featured in his paintings. The roofline that he has abstracted for several of his new works began life as an ad for a doghouse in a Canadian Tire catalogue. Another painting has a blended red background, a colour that Moppett first noticed in a magazine ad for jewellery.

“What I like about it is you can’t quite tell what it is,” he says. “Is it a landscape? Or some photographer’s backdrop with bright lights streaming across it? It intrigues me.”

His voice trailing off, it immediately becomes clear that analyzing what is essentially spirit put onto canvas is unimportant to Moppett. What’s critical to this respected artist is being tuned into a place that allows his unique imagery to be fully realized. Paintings filled with lush blues and subtle reds where top hats and full moons are captured aloft are perhaps best understood in terms of Gestalt, a concept originally introduced in 1890 by philosopher Christian Freiherr von Ehrenfels to describe experiences and phenomena that could not be easily understood using the ordinary five senses.

While viewing Moppett’s works, Gestaltian theory seems to be an appropriate paradigm to gain insight into an artist who asks, “Is it possible to make a completely non-objective painting?”

“I think it’s tricky,” says Moppett, answering his own question. “But that’s where I’m trying to go.”

Although Moppett’s work has been dissected by more than a few art writers looking to unlock the meaning, what clearly shines through is emotion. Moppett has a reserved presentation — a sort of modern-day shaman whose truths are channeled through his brush, he chooses to let his paintings communicate what he cannot.

If emotion and sensitivity are the hallmarks of Moppett’s work, it is his boundless curiosity that drives him. “I read a lot. I read theory, I read the professional magazines and books, and I look at art. I think of it as keeping in shape.”

Keeping in shape — maintaining his intellectual muscle — is exactly what Moppett has done during a career spanning more than three decades. Akin to a long-distance runner, a marathoner who has been able to keep a strong and steady pace throughout the past 35 years, he was for the majority of this period a husband and father while also working full-time. He has focused on creating unique works of art, knowing full well that self-discipline, rigour and perseverance are the stuff that forms the foundation of a successful career in the often-fickle world of art.

Moppett was born in 1945 in Surrey, England, and arrived in Calgary in 1957 as a boy with dreams of one day working for the Walt Disney Company. Enrolling in 1963 in what was then simply known as the Alberta College of Art (ACA), Moppett had a life-changing experience when in his third year



he returned to England and viewed a Francis Bacon painting at the Tate Gallery.

“It knocked my socks off,” he says. “I’ll always remember that. It was really human.”

Feeling the depth at which art could have an impact placed Moppett firmly on the path to painting, instead of pursuing his boyhood fantasy of becoming an illustrator in the animation industry.

Graduating from ACA in 1967, Moppett has ever since remained a fixture in Alberta’s art scene. His career as a creator is the envy of many: more than 20 solo exhibitions to his credit, dozens of group shows and, in 1997, the \$25,000 Gershon Iskowicz prize (named to honour the late Polish-Canadian painter) for excellence in his work and his dedication to the visual arts. At age 60, Moppett has certainly earned his greatest reward: time to paint.

Although the successful artist, whose works can be found in collections ranging from the Alberta Foundation for the Arts to Concordia University in Montreal, could rest on his laurels, put his feet up and settle into an easy chair, this is not what lies ahead for Moppett. With his most recent paintings showing this fall at Calgary’s TrépanierBaer gallery, Moppett envisions even further explorations into the dimensions he discovers while painting in his studio.

“It’s about how you can lose yourself,” he says. “You go to some other place. It’s not that you’re flaky or anything like that, it’s just that you’re on another planet.”

***I’m so like:* New Paintings, an exhibition of new works by Ron Moppett, is at TrépanierBaer in Calgary September 15 to October 8. Opening, with artist in attendance, September 15, 5 to 7:30 pm.**

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